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ABSTRACT

One of the keys to enabling children from disadvantaged backgrounds to be successful in school and later in life might be to provide them, through mentors, with exposure to literacy and numeracy, and to introduce problem-solving techniques to them early in their school careers. This study was concerned specifically with the mentorship experiences of: low socioeconomic or educationally disadvantaged elementary students who might not achieve their maximum potential in school or later in life; mentors who made commitments to work "one-on-one" with mentees on a regular basis for one school year; and the school mentorship coordinator as she worked to bring mentors and mentees together. These issues were examined at Norwood School in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, where a mentorship program was implemented during the 1997-98 school year and continued in 1998-99. The program was designed to increase student literacy in this inner-city elementary school. Administrators and a teacher were interviewed, and questionnaires were distributed to 136 mentors (45 surveys returned), 136 mentees (83 returned), and 10 teachers (7 returned). Test scores were also examined. Compared with the literature, the findings are that: overwhelmingly students enjoyed spending time with their mentors; the majority of the mentors also enjoyed their interactions with their mentees; having an adult work with students gives students the feeling they are "worthwhile"; mentorship programs are most successful when designed to help develop the "whole child" socially and academically; and besides understanding how literacy develops in children, the program coordinator needs to have exceptional interpersonal communication skills. Test results showed conclusively that more students achieved and exceeded grade level expectations during the 1998-99 school year than the previous year. (Contains 11 references.) (NKA)

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Mentoring: Promoting Inner City Elementary School Student Literacy

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Background

Over a decade ago Bossert (1988) asserted that ". . . one key 'effect' always is associated with the cha ter of our public schools: to provide children with the opportunities to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. . ." (p. 341). Bossert went on to argue that research into "both effective and ineffective schools has begun to identify specific school-level factors which promote higher student achievement, particularly in the basic skills" (p. 345). In Alberta, the recent province-wide "Site-based management" initiative devolving considerable decision making power to individual schools is based on assertions similar to that made by Bossert. In many Alberta school jurisdictions, various individuals (e.g., superintendents, trustees, business representatives, parents, teachers) have issued challenges to schools to have all interest groups (e.g., administrators, teachers, parents, community services, community volunteers, etc.) work closely together to improve their schools.

In a study of over 500 "successful" young adults from low socioeconomic or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, Lefkowitz (1986) found that many respondents attributed their success to the support of an "adult who cared." Discussing success in school, McIntosh (1998) reported that

> children who do well in school often approach school "ready to learn." These children have already been exposed to books and numbers; they have been introduced to problem-solving techniques, and they have developed the social skills needed in group settings. (1998, p. 9)

One of the keys to enabling children from disadvantaged backgrounds to be successful in school and later in life might be to provide them, through mentors, with exposure to literacy and numeracy, and to introduce problem solving techniques early in their school careers.

The present study is concerned specifically with the mentorship experiences of:

1. low socioeconomic or educationally disadvantaged elementary students who might never achieve their maximum potential in school and, later, as productive members of society;
2. the mentors who made commitments to work "one-on-one" with mentees on a regular basis over the period of at least one school year;
3. the school mentorship coordinator as she worked to bring mentors and mentees together.

Given these experiences, two objectives are served by this study, these are to: (a) refine or further develop theory regarding how adult volunteers in schools can work to support classroom teachers to help students master the skills necessary to become literate, and (b) to develop practical suggestions to nurture and enhance the relationships that are required of school staffs and adult mentors as they strive to address the learning needs of their pupils. In the present study, these issues were examined from within the domain of the "inner city elementary school culture" at Norwood School in Edmonton. Special attention was paid to the considerations which must be made by school staff and community volunteers working in this environment.

Relationship to Existing Research and Literature

Ellis, Small-McGinley, and Hart (1998) defined a mentor as "one who provides one-to-one support and attention, is a friend and role model, boosts a child's self-esteem, enhances a

student's educational experience" (p. 5). Ellis et al. (1998) further defined mentoring as "meeting regularly over an extended period of time with the goal of enabling a special bond of mutual commitment based on the development of respect, communication and personal growth" (p. 5). Ellis and Small-McGinley (1998) noted that effective mentorship programs place high priority on the development of the relationship between the adult mentor and the student mentee. This relationship makes the time spent reading and writing more enjoyable for the mentee and enables the mentor to be a more effective role model. The literature suggests many benefits to disadvantaged youth participating in formal mentorship programs. First, Howard (1990) claims that these youth can learn the potency of putting forth a strong effort. Second, Smink (1990) suggests that mentored disadvantaged students are exposed to and become acquainted with the values and resources of adults from occupational and social worlds very different from those with which they are familiar. Third, Levinson (1978) and Mosely and Todd (1983) suggest that by giving students confidence in themselves, mentors stimulate their mentees to dream about what they can do with their lives motivating them to be upwardly mobile in society.

The present study reports on the implementation, during the 1997/98 school year, and the sustainment, during the 1998/99 school year, of Norwood School's mentorship program. A program designed to increase student literacy in this inner city elementary school serving students of low socioeconomic and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Perceptions of the benefits and the detriments of this program are described from the points of view of school staff, mentors, and the students being mentored. This study helps to address, what Lee and Cramond (1999) described as "one of the shortcomings of the existing literature on the effectiveness of mentoring programs is that the participants in most of the studies were middle and high school students.... Little is known about the effectiveness of mentoring with younger children" (p. 173).

Method and Data Source

This investigation made use of (a) school mentorship program documentation; (b) semi-structured interviews with three school staff – the principal, the mentorship program coordinator, and one teacher; (c) questionnaires distributed to 136 mentors, 136 mentees (note that surveys for students in kindergarten and grade one were administered orally), and 10 teachers with response rates of n = 45, n = 83, and n = 7 respectively; and district administered Highest Level of Achievement Test (HLAT) scores. The analyses of both the interview and the questionnaire data were conducted through the use of narrative accounts to support emerging themes. To enhance the internal validity of the study, an audit trail was provided so that emerging themes could be verified by a second researcher.

Documents regarding the development and implementation of the program were collected from the principal and the program coordinator. These documents were perused to gain an overview of the goals of the mentorship program at the school. The documents were also examined for details regarding the logistics of implementing the program at this inner city school.

One semi-structured interview, of 60 minutes duration, was conducted in June of the 1998/99 school year with each interview respondent. Dialogue during the interviews focussed on: (a) the goals of the program; (b) the structure of the program during the 1998/99 school year and

how it compared to the program the previous year; (c) the sorts of support that were provided to teachers, mentors, and mentees; (d) the strengths and challenges of the program; and (e) evidence that demonstrated that the program was making a difference for the students.

Questionnaires were distributed to all mentors, mentees, and teachers in the school. The mentors and the teachers were asked to provide their perceptions on the same issues as the interview respondents described in the previous paragraph. Mentees were asked to describe: (a) what they did during weekly sessions with their mentors, (b) important "things" they had learned from their mentor, (c) explain whether their sessions with their mentors were enjoyable and useful, and (d) what they would change in the mentorship program if they could.

District developed HLATs are administered to all students in grades one to six throughout the school district to assess student reading and writing abilities (except that student writing ability is not assessed using HLATs in grades three and six, instead mandatory standardised provincial examinations are administered to these students). Results from the HLATs are compiled by district personnel and report the percentage of students achieving or exceeding provincial expectations for reading and writing by grade level for individual schools in the district.

Essentially, the purpose of the various data collection and analysis processes was to enable us to formulate responses to the questions:

1. How was the mentorship program operated at this inner city school?
2. What did the mentors, mentees, teachers, mentorship program coordinator, and the principal do in the mentorship program?
3. What differences has the mentorship program made in the levels of student literacy at this inner city school?

Findings and Discussion

The findings described here are compiled from the data contained in interviews, surveys, and documents relating to the in-school mentorship program at Norwood School. These findings are compared and contrasted with what the literature indicates as best practice as they emerge.

Goals of the Mentorship Program

Many goals exist within the mentorship program at Norwood School. The overarching goals of the program centre on two aspects: (a) improved literacy, and (b) relationship building. Short-term goals within the program include: (a) having a mentor for every child in the school by the end of the year 2000, (b) having mentors who provide mentees with a minimum of 30 minutes per week of their time for the entire academic school year.

The goals of the inschool mentorship program at Norwood School appear to fit well with what the literature (e.g., Ellis & Small-McGinley, 1998; Ellis et al., 1998) indicate as best practice. By placing a high priority on relationship building, this mentorship program encourages students to develop appropriate social skills and it enables students to better enjoy the time they spend with their mentors reading and writing.

Structure of the Mentorship Program

The "in-school" mentorship program is coordinated by the "partnership coordinator." The partnership coordinator was also instrumental in the initial development, subsequent refinement, and implementation of the program.

Mentors – representing university and college students, police personnel, military personnel, teachers and administrators on leave from their positions, members of the surrounding business community, friends and relatives of staff, and retirees – are recruited from the community at large to work with mentees for the duration of the school year. Mentors and mentees work "one-on-one" for periods of 30 minutes once per week. Thirty minute sessions were the minimum length of time that mentors were asked to spend with mentees, however, some mentors spent as much as one hour per session per week working with the children that had been assigned to them. Individuals interested in becoming mentors met with the partnership coordinator at the school to complete: (a) an application form, (b) a police security check form, (c) a Child Welfare Records check form. Additionally, potential mentors were also asked to provide two letters of reference – one professional and one personal.

During this initial meeting the partnership coordinator interviews the volunteer to gain a sense of the person's background, character, strengths, and preferences and orients the person to the in-school mentorship program. This interview process serves to provide the partnership coordinator with information necessary (e.g., age, grade level, and type of child that mentors would like to work with) to successfully match mentors with mentees. Matching of mentors and mentees is crucial, on this issue Roz stated,

> It's about personalities. These are people, these children are people, and just like an adult relationship, we pick and choose people who we would like to be around. I think there's that same value in the mentor relationship.

The orientation component of this brief initial meeting provides potential mentors with resources and an oral overview outlining (a) how to establish a mentoring relationship, (b) how to share books, (c) ideas for the first meeting, (d) ideas for subsequent meetings throughout the school year, (d) how to be a successful mentor, (e) what to do if unanticipated scenarios should develop during the school year (e.g., the mentee asks to borrow five dollars, the mentee asks to see where the mentor lives), (g) how to deal with a child who discloses abuse, and (h) a metaphor for thinking about mentorship.

Mentors are invited to the school for introduction to their mentees once the partnership coordinator has received the Police Check Clearance. This clearance is typically obtained 10 days after the appropriate form has been filed with the police service. The Police Security Check and the Child Welfare Records Check are filed through the Big Sisters and Big Brothers Agency of Edmonton. These documents are then kept on file at the Big Sisters and Big Brothers Agency for confidentiality reasons.

In its second year of operation, Norwood's in-school mentorship program changed most substantially in the area of mentor recruitment and acceptability. During the first year of operation, all mentors who passed the background checks and indicated a willingness to work with students were accepted to the in-school mentorship program. This resulted in a large "dropout" rate of mentors at various points throughout the school year; students were then left

without mentors for the remainder of the year. During the 1998/99 school year, the program coordinator was much more selective about who was acceptable as a mentor. In an interview she stated:

> ...the quality of the mentors has increased...there are people who are really motivated to come here and do this for intrinsic reasons. People are following through for a one year commitment. They are really taking that seriously. Initially, when I talk to people on the phone, I really make the commitment which we require from them clear. If they say [mentoring] is just something...that they would like to try, I say to them . "I'd like you to give some more thought to this, we'd love to have you as part of our program, but this is what we need from you.

Interestingly, this more stringent screening was still accomplished while making potential mentors feel that they had something very important to offer children. One mentor wrote in his survey, "the initial interview with Roz was great! Before I started I felt needed, wanted, and like I had already made a new friend." Accepting only mentors who were willing to make a full-year, 30-minute per week, minimum, commitment to the in-school mentorship program required both the program coordinator and the principal to promote the program at highly visible functions such as the United Way's "Annual Kick-off" and directly to the private sector. The program coordinator indicated that

> there were lots of individual requests from businesses for [the principal] to come and speak about the program. She did something like 20 or 25 speeches in the fall, and she passed about 20 more off to me as well. So we had the opportunity to really get out there and get the message out about the program. Nine-tenths of the battle is just getting the word out...making people aware...and interested in volunteering.

The structure of the in-school mentorship program is not only in keeping with best practice, but it exemplifies best practice. Moreley and Rossman (1997) identify structural characteristics of exemplary volunteer tutor and mentor programs as including:

1. Establishing a coordinator who is charged with responsibility for volunteers' efforts and ensuring that the program operates smoothly;
2. Putting forth energy and creativity by the program organisers to recruit volunteers;
3. Screening volunteers to (a) obtain mentors who are committed to working with mentees and (b) protect the youth with whom they will be working.

Mentor-Mentee Activities

The range of activities was dependent upon the age and reading level of the student, as well as, the common interests of the mentee and the mentor. Students in the primary grades, kindergarten to grade three, often engaged in the following: (a) the mentor reading books to the mentee, (b) the student reading books to the mentor, (c) paired reading, (d) drawing a picture to best capture what the mentee liked about the story, (e) alphabet recognition, and (f) playing learning games. Students in grades four to six often engage in (a) "novel studies," (b) supporting classroom work, (c) writing stories, and (d) playing learning games.

Again, the Norwood School mentorship program was in keeping with best practice as

outlined in much literature (e.g., Morley & Rossman, 1997). Mentors and mentees were matched by considering factors such as gender, ethnicity, language...and shared interests.

Support Provided to Participants

Teachers. Roz, the partnership coordinator, provided teachers with several forms of support. First, at the beginning of the year she provided a package containing various activities and suggestions for weaving the mentorship activities with classroom activities to reinforce the curriculum being learned by students. Second, Roz ensured that any messages she received from mentors were passed along to the appropriate teachers thus keeping teachers informed of what mentors and mentees were doing. Third, Roz kept all teachers apprised of which students in their classes had mentors and what days and times the mentors could be expected to be working with mentees, thus teachers knew in advance which students would be absent at specific times during the day allowing them to plan their programs in advance.

The literature did not make reference to the support required by teachers to best make use of the services being provided by mentors. However, it was abundantly clear that in order for teachers to perceive the benefits of the mentorship program to outweigh the detriments they must be provided support in terms of a communication conduit between themselves, mentors, and mentees.

Mentors. Mentors were provided with support in at least three ways, these included: (a) training, (b) providing space and resources for working with mentees, and (c) facilitating open communication between them and teachers. In addition to the support provided to mentors during the initial screening and orientation interview, mentors were also provided with individual mentorship training sessions at the school. The program coordinator also arranged for mentors to attend mentorship training sessions (i.e., evening and Saturday workshop) provided by (a) Big Sisters and Big Brothers and (b) Prospects for Literacy.

Space, in the form of a "reading room," for mentors to meet with mentees was cited as a critical resource by everyone who was interviewed. The reading room also has numerous books and literacy based enrichment games that mentors and mentees can make use of during their weekly visits.

Several strategies were used to facilitate communication between teachers and the mentors working with students. First, mentors were provided with a "meet the teacher" evening during which teachers and mentors could meet individually to exchange information regarding students with whom the mentors were working. Meetings between teachers and mentors also occurred occasionally during lunch hours and after school. Second, some teaching staff also made use of a "communication book" to convey messages and teaching ideas between them and the mentors. Third, some teaching staff joined forces to develop classroom "mentors' binders" containing ideas for activities that could be used by mentors which would make use of books and other activities contained in the reading room to build on themes being addressed in class by the classroom teacher. Fourth, the partnership coordinator ensured that she had contact with every mentor at least once every three months to discuss any issues related to mentoring. Fifth, the partnership coordinator ensured that any messages she received from teachers or administration

were passed along to the appropriate mentors (e.g., letting mentors know in advance that students would not be available at a particular time because of a class or school fieldtrip).

At the school level, mentors were also included in many ways to make them feel that they are part of the Norwood School community. Mentors are invited to socialize with one-another and with staff at the annual "mentor Christmas luncheon," the annual "volunteer appreciation tea," and the annual "year-end party." Mentors are also provided with copies of the monthly school newsletter so that they are aware of what is going on in the school and within the district as it relates to the school.

Moreley and Rossman (1997) suggest that exemplary volunteer mentor programs should provide direction and recognition for mentors. Specifically, they outline the following as necessary:

1. Volunteers must be provided with training so that they can better understand their roles;
2. Ongoing support and monitoring of volunteers should be provided;
3. Mentors' work should be recognized in ongoing and in small ways in addition to more formal public recognition activities.

Norwood School's mentorship program goes beyond these three factors by also providing space for mentors to work with their mentees and by ensuring that the mentors are aware of how their work can support the teachers' instructional objectives.

Mentees. Student support provided directly to children comes mostly from the partnership coordinator. Occasionally, mentors are unable to attend regularly scheduled meetings with their mentees. This can lead to feelings of abandonment in children who are often already insecure. During my interview with the partnership coordinator, she stated

> ...sometimes kids will come and say "My mentor didn't come, why?" I'll phone the mentor and find out why. Phoning the mentor, following up, being accountable to the kids is something else that is important for them.

Levinson (1978) and Mosely and Todd (1983) talk about how mentors give students confidence in themselves. They do not, however, address the inevitable consequences suffered by a child who is "stood up" by a mentor. The partnership coordinator and the staff with whom she works at the Norwood School mentorship program all recognize that mentors occasionally are unable to keep meeting commitments. Children often do not understand why their mentors failed meet with them as they had been promised, this can lead to the deterioration of self-confidence in the student. To mitigate these potentially destructive effects on children, the partnership coordinator ensures that mentees know why their mentor was unable to attend a meeting with them; this is done in advance if possible.

Partnership coordinator. During my interview with Roz, the partnership coordinator, several themes were elaborated upon as they related to support of this position in the school. This support is best described through Roz's excited words,

> I have received a lot of support from Sandra [the principal], who is my supervisor, especially in terms of recruitment. She really brings people in and she's always willing to pass the credit along.

Sandra has also given lots of support in terms of flexibility of my position. I get to make my own schedule, I'm responsible for it. I wear lots of hats, do a lot of different things in the school. She's given me the flexibility to spread myself as thin as I can be to get everything done.

I've also received a lot of support from Big Sisters Big Brothers, in terms of initial training with mentors and setting up a program, and learning about the whole interview process. Lots of support from Prospect Literacy in terms of training and just giving another slant to mentorship. Support from United Way also helped to pay for my professional development – last summer I took a course on diagnostic reading...the more I can learn about how children read, the more I can help mentors by giving suggestions and providing activities for them.

There's been a lot of support for my position. Absolutely!

Morley and Rossman (1997) endorse the ongoing "training" of personnel engaging in tutor or mentor programs. They state, "many programs provide or arrange for periodic training... periodic training is desirable to keep the staff abreast of current information and practices and to expose them to different perspectives." The Norwood School partnership coordinator appear to receive adequate professional development opportunities as recommended by Morley and Rossman. It is also obvious, however, that professional development opportunities are not, by themselves, adequate for the operation and maintenance of a successful mentorship program. Sandra and Roz both emphasised the importance of (a) flexibility for partnership coordinator to direct the program and (b) and self-direction as a characteristic of the partnership coordinator as being keys to the success of this program.

Strengths and Challenges of the Program

The strengths of the program in its second year of operation were numerous. Support infrastructure was evident at all levels within the school for all participants in the mentorship program, including: mentors, mentees, teaching staff, and the program coordinator. It is abundantly clear that administrative support (i.e., fiscal and moral) for the mentorship program is crucial to its success. It is also clear that teaching staff have embraced the notion of the in-school mentorship program as very capable of enhancing student literacy and teachers' efforts to assist students to become literate, consequently, staff are willing to overlook the inconveniences created by having students leave their classrooms on a weekly basis. Staff are also willing to be ready for the work that mentors perform with students; this entails having preparing and making available extra work and activities related to class instructional objectives for the mentors and mentees to use.

Of the over 160 students attending Norwood School, 136 had mentors during the 1998/99 school year, this was up from approximately 80 during the 1997/98 school year. Mentors were better screened during the 1998/99 school year resulting in the vast majority of mentors following through on their commitment to spend a minimum of 30 minutes per week over the entire school year with their mentees. Training of the mentors was very effective as a result of providing mentors with "information packages" to take home and then providing opportunities to

engage in training through the Big Sisters and Big Brothers organization, Prospect Literacy, and workshops held at the school.

The reading room and its resources were also cited by all levels of respondents – administration, teachers, project coordinator, and many mentors and mentees – as critical to the program's success. The room gave mentors and mentees a place to work uninterrupted. The resources available in the reading room provided mentors and mentees with opportunities to continue to build on learning objectives related to the pupil's curriculum level.

The principal was emphatic that the reason the mentorship program was as successful as is was in the school was due to the characteristics of the program coordinator, Roz. Sandra stated,

> The strength of the program is, I think, Roz Klak, she's phenomenal. Her organizational skills are exemplary and her interpersonal skills are very strong, plus she's a really good public speaker. To have to go out and recruit, that's a big part of this job is recruiting and she does that really, really well. She's the reason the program's flying. Mentors trust her. Staff trust her. She's a team player. She makes no judgements and she's not "cliquey." One of the things Roz has is generosity of spirit. She knows when to give people breaks, when to back off, she's very good that way.... Roz is on her own. I don't micromanage her, I have no desire to micromanage her.

Along a similar vein, a teacher wrote in her survey,

> Roz is an excellent ambassador for the program. The number of excellent mentee-mentor matches is amazing! Roz is an excellent communicator so she does well to keep everyone aware and informed. She facilitates this excellent program. I believe her very nature and skills attract so many mentors and keep them involved.

Attesting to the fact that communication was very effectively handled, the vast majority of mentors commented similarly positively in response to the survey question "what did we do particularly well and should continue to do next year?" Typical comments were,

1. I found that communication was excellent! I enjoyed receiving the newsletters.
2. Keeping very open lines of communication between the coordinator and mentor.
3. The program is very well run. Keep it up. Although I wasn't able to attend many after school activities, I like knowing they were being offered.
4. Being included by receiving school letters, bulletins, etc.
5. The written communication and invitations to school activities.
6. Made me feel welcome!

Is Mentorship Making a Difference?

The teachers at Norwood School clearly embraced the mentorship program. They are committed to the program and assist mentors in many ways by providing reading materials and other activities for the mentors and mentees to engage during their visits. Teachers were all extremely tolerant of the interruptions resulting from students leaving their classrooms – they saw academic and social value in what mentors and mentees were doing. It seems that mentors help students by exposing them to literature and promoting the development of appropriate social skills.

Improved literacy. Teachers, mentors and students all provided evidence of improved literacy. During her interview, in response to the question "how do you know that the mentorship program has made a difference?" Susan – a teacher – responded,

> I just find there's more of a willingness to read. There's more a willingness to tackle unknown words. There's a love of literature which – that's partly what we're doing in the classroom – partly what we're focussing on in the school but it also comes with having that one-on-one time, sharing a really good book with somebody. And they're here, they don't miss those days. It's very rare that they miss the day their mentor is coming.

In the survey sent to teaching staff, all teachers provided anecdotal evidence of how the mentor relationship had affected a child's attitude, behaviour, and achievement. One teacher wrote,

> I am going back to reflect on the Beth-Mark (both pseudonyms) relationship. Beth lived for Mark's visits. She worked harder on making better behaviour choices and maintaining a positive attitude. This resulted in increased achievement. I see this process beginning with another student.

The vast majority of teaching staff were also able to comment on the differences in reading behaviour of their students who had mentors. A second teacher wrote,

> the students who have mentors are more interested in reading and more firmly believe they are readers. They also can identify at least two additional strategies for decoding unfamiliar words. Several students have also extended their range of interests which enhances their ability to comprehend new information.

Mentors were also very positive in their responses to the survey question "do you feel you have contributed to your mentee's ability to read better?" Typical responses included:

1. Yes! I have seen Bonnie's (a pseudonym) reading abilities get steadily stronger since we started. Her enthusiasm to read has also grown because she is more confident.
2. She's getting a lot better at "sounding out words." She has more confidence when she reads.
3. Michelle (a pseudonym) read more than 17 books and wrote brief report on at least 11 of them. I also noticed that Michelle's ability to read fluently has improved. I did two quick reading comprehension tests and Michelle obtained perfect scores on both. I would like to expose Michelle to Instrumental Enrichment in the fall.
4. Yes. I think I introduced her to new words and their meanings and she tried using those new words in the weeks following while we were talking.
5. Yes, I do. When we first started she relied a lot on the pictures to guess the words and now she actually sounds out the words without looking at the pictures.

Furthermore, of the 83 students who returned their survey, all listed reading as one of the activities they engaged in while spending time with their mentors. The vast majority of the student respondents also described their time with their mentors as "fun." It was clear that these children enjoyed their time with their mentors as they read and engaged in other literacy related activities.

Finally, the most concrete evidence of improved literacy skills at Norwood School emerge from the students' HLAT results. In all areas assessed by the HLAT, students at Norwood School demonstrated improvement from the 1997/98 school year to the 1998/99 school year. Student reading ability in grades one, two, and three improved from 45% of students

achieving grade level in 1997/98 to 73% of students demonstrating the ability to read at grade level or higher in 1998/99. Similarly, student writing ability in grades one and two climbed from 55% achieving grade level or higher to 70% of students performing at grade level or higher in terms of their writing abilities in the 1998/99 school year. Although less dramatic, reading ability of students in grades four, five, and six also climbed from the 1997/98 school year, with 50% of students achieving at grade level or higher, to the 1998/99 school year, with 56% of students achieving at grade level or higher. Finally, grades four and five student writing abilities also improved with 17% more students achieving or exceeding grade level expectations in the 1998/99 school year, for a total of 61%, than in the previous school year.

Social growth. Social growth seems to appear in students in a variety of ways. Students are now more likely to be thinking about how they can affect their futures, they are realizing that they have self-worth: they are developing self-esteem. Susan, the teacher interviewed, indicated most succinctly what changes the mentorship program has made in the students she has taught. She stated,

> I find the biggest thing is just that sense of confidence that the kids have and that sense of being valued by somebody who's not paid to be here. That there's somebody who cares enough about them that they donate that chunk of time and that they'll keep that commitment and they'll be here for them. I find my students are more risk takers and that's due, in part, to the mentorship program. I hear them talking – which was rare before – about the future. They talk about what they're going to be when they grow up and some of it's "I'm going to be such and such 'cuz my mentor is such and such."
>
> I can remember teaching grade three social studies and when we got to occupations it was like a blank. "What's an occupation?" So that sense of looking beyond today and having some hope for the future that you can make something of your life.

This finding supports Levinson's (1978) and Mosely and Todd's (1983) assertion that mentoring gives students confidence about themselves, that mentors do indeed stimulate mentees to dream about the future and the potential for what they can do with their lives. It is clear to many of the children in the mentorship program that their mentors care about them. Sandra, the principal recounted a story of the grade six graduation ceremony that was held the week prior to the interview with her, she said,

> We encourage our mentees to involve their mentors. We had the grade six graduation ceremony last week so some of the kids asked their mentors to attend. The parents never attended, but the mentors attended.

Recounting the story of another young girl in her school, Sandra excitedly and "matter-of-factly" stated,

> Marie Glun (a pseudonym) has a mentor who'll be far more significant in her life than her own father is. And it's not a same sex match, it's a man and a girl. We've arranged for Marie to go to "Tim Horton" camp in Quebec in August. Airplane, whole nine yards. The police officer who helped arrange this picked Marie up because her dad would not taker her to the orientation meeting. On the way to the orientation meeting all she spoke about was her mentor and what her mentor expected her to do when she was at camp. How she still had to read a book every night and how her mentor makes her do a

> book report. There was not one mention of her parents, nothing. Okay, now this guy has real significance to Marie. Plus he goes on field trips now as a volunteer with the class. When she goes on field trip, he'll go as well with the class. He'll take pictures, he'll put photo albums together for Marie of what they saw on the field trip. He'll do a little running commentary....He's an retired educator. This guy has become really, really important. He's consistent and he's given her self-esteem.

Marie is a prime example of how mentored disadvantaged students become exposed to values and resources of adults from occupational and social worlds very different from their own, ultimately integrating them into their own repertoire.

Respondent Suggestions for Improvement.

Although the first suggestion for improvement was also mentioned by some teachers, it is noteworthy that all of the suggestions contained within this section were shared with me by Roz, the program coordinator. This fact attests to her professional qualities of not becoming complacent even when everything appears to be working well.

First, mentors should be provided with a monthly classroom newsletter so that he or she can be apprised of what has been taking place in the mentee's class over the past month and of what is planned during the coming month. This newsletter could address the activities of all classrooms within one document.

Second, monthly meetings should be scheduled to allow mentors to meet and interact with one-another as well as with the program coordinator. Such meetings could serve as the medium for exchanging ideas and further building "community" as it relates to mentorship at Norwood School. Some of these monthly meetings could also provide a means for delivering in-service education to the mentors on such topics as "paired reading" and "writing." This sort of meeting would ensure that mentors would be able to meet regularly with the program coordinator and their peers to share their triumphs and disappointments.

Third, Roz wants to develop a theme based "book bag" resource for mentors to use as they work with their mentees. Each book bag will be related to a particular theme and will contain learning ability appropriate books and games. As Roz described it,

> Oh! Do you want to do some reading about pirates? [The mentor and mentee] will grab a bag, and in the bag there'll be three different types of book on the subject, as well as, activity cards related to those books and that theme.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Emerging from the literature and the findings cited above are the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. Overwhelmingly, students enjoy spending time with their mentors. Students made comments typical of the following in response to "do you like having sessions with your mentor?": I learn a lot from her, she like to make me laugh, she tells me about her family, I feel that I am special when she reads to me.

2. The vast majority of this year's mentors also enjoyed their interactions with their mentees. One mentor had developed such a close relationship with her mentee, she indicated that she would follow her mentee to the child's new school in the coming year to work with her there.

3. Having an adult commit 30 minutes per week to work with a student on a regular basis seems to give some students the feeling that they are "worthwhile." As was the case with many of the student responses, one grade two child wrote, "before I had a mentor I felt lonely and now I feel happy to have a friend.

4. Mentorship programs, such as this one, appear to be most successful when they are designed to help develop the "whole child" socially and academically. This is particularly true of students from low socioeconomic or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds found in the context of the inner city elementary school milieu.

5. It appears that as a result of their interactions with people who have, will have, or have had successful careers, students began to think in terms of what they might become when they reach adulthood. Many of these children, teachers indicated, would not be thinking in those terms were it not for the influence of their mentors.

6. In addition to understanding how literacy develops in children, the program coordinator needs to have exceptional interpersonal communications skills to be able to recruit mentors and address the needs of mentees, mentors, teachers, and administration. This person must have the innate ability to understand people and social relationships among people so that they can be encouraged to continue to work together for the benefit of the learner. It was clear from formally interviewing the principal, teacher, and program coordinator and informally speaking to other teaching staff that the program coordinator position could not be handled by someone working less than full-time, even in a school of approximately 160 students. Furthermore, it is imperative that the program coordinator have an educational background to understand the needs of teachers vis-à-vis curriculum and to be able to assist mentors in developing literacy skills in young children.

7. Without the support of all staff, especially teachers, in a school a mentorship program, such as that found at Norwood School, can not be successful. Staff must believe that the inconvenience of having students "pulled" from their classes is more than amply offset by the benefit of improved student literacy and social skills.

8. Most importantly, mentees, mentors, and staff all gave indicators of improved student literacy. Comments from students such as "[my mentor] helps me work better, ...read better, and ...write better," were common in the data. On this theme, one teacher commented, "students choose reading for free time!" These assertions were further supported by improved student achievement on district administered standardised tests of reading and writing. From the anecdotal and test data it appears that the Norwood School

mentorship program does have positive effects on student literacy.

Theoretical Significance and Practical Importance

The significance of this study has both theoretical and practical elements. Theoretical significance lies in the refinement of theory regarding how teachers and mentors from the community can best work with students to help them develop requisite literacy skills early in their educational careers. Children who fall behind early have a difficult time catching up, Salvin (1994) stated that disadvantaged third graders who were found to be reading below grade level were unlikely to complete high school. Test results obtained from the children at this school show conclusively that more students achieved and exceeded grade level expectations during the 1998/99 school year than in the previous year. Undoubtedly these children will be more likely to learn the potency of putting forth a strong effort than their lower achieving counterparts (Howard, 1990).This study sought to describe the "path" taken at one inner city elementary school to help young children develop the literacy skills needed to be educationally successful. The practical aspect of the research for public schools hinges on the recommendations that have emerged regarding how individuals might proceed with regard to developing and implementing a mentorship program

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